

Latrobe Valley Naturalist

SPRING CAMP 2013

Monday morning - Excursion to Long Forest. Long Forest is an island of Mallee vegetation situated between Bacchus Marsh and Melton just north of the Western Freeway. Our excursion leader, Marilyn Hewish is intimately acquainted with the area, having written a book "Birds of Long Forest 1889 - 2005" which used historical records and sightings over many years to give a comprehensive picture. Rohan Bugg is also listed as an author, having provided Marilyn with his records over many years.

Marilyn told us that 7000 to 8000 years ago the Mallee vegetation had originally extended this far, then wetter climate conditions and volcanic activity had caused it to retreat, leaving this small pocket. It survived because the larva had not covered this area and it is in a rain shadow, so the poor shale and sandstone soil and low rainfall was suitable for the mallee vegetation.

The mallee trees are all Bull Mallee, *Eucalyptus behriana*, and it is a Rocky Chenopod Scrub plant community. The dominant wattles flowering were Gold-dust Wattles, *Acacia acinacea* and they were everywhere. The other main understorey plants were Fragrant Saltbush, *Rhagodia parabolica* (the smelly fish one) and Saloop, *Einadia hastate*.

Rohan told me to put my plant books away and look at the birds. There were many calling and Marilyn and Rohan knew them all. The Grey Currawong and Fan-tailed Cuckoo called almost constantly, and we saw Striated and Buff-rumped Thornbills, the latter being the only thornbill with a plain yellowish front. There was much excitement when a Speckled Warbler was heard calling nearby, and it flew in and out of the nearby scrub allowing barely a glimpse. Further on Rohan heard a Scarlet Robin calling, so he whistled it in, alternating his call with its call. I couldn't tell the difference and it seemed the birds couldn't either, as two males came in and started chasing each other around.

The highlight was a wonderful view of a male Red-capped Robin sitting on a bare branch. Everyone saw it except me, as I had nicked off behind a bush for a call of nature.

Luckily, when Jackie and I stopped for lunch at the Long Forest on our way up to the Little Desert weeks later, a female red cap appeared right in front of us as we sat in our chairs in the picnic area.

The rain coming late morning sent us all back to the cars, but it was lovely to get a taste of this small patch of mallee so close to Melbourne.

Wendy Savage

HEART MORASS

I was delighted to hear an environment success story when so many of our national parks are becoming degraded or abused. Matt Bowler and a partnership of organisations, under the banner of the Heart Morass Restoration Project, has restored a dry saline degraded and overgrazed landscape into substantial wetlands that are well on the way to their original pre-European condition.

Heart Morass is a large wetland wedged between two Ramsar sites. To the east are Lake Wellington and the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site and to the west is Sale Common – also a Ramsar site. It is also at the confluence of two major rivers in our region - the Thompson and Latrobe Rivers. It consists of a series of large shallow connected basins that are no more than 2 meters deep even at the deepest point. The entire Heart Morass complex is quite large covering approximately 1800 Ha.

Over the years prior to the restoration project commencing the Morass has been subject to high salinity water spilling over from Lake Wellington. This has been compounded by a reduction in frequency of fresh water flows and flooding from the rivers to 'flush' out the salt and reduce the salinity of the waters retained within the Morass. Also compounding the problem are the existence of acid-sulphate soils around Lake Wellington and the surrounding wetlands.

In 2006/07 just prior to the commencement of the project, Gippsland was at the peak of a major drought. Heart 'Morass' was devoid of life and looked like a barren wasteland. There was a layer of salt crystals on the surface of the ground and what little water had a pH of around 3 – very acidic.

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It was immediately after this time that a new era of management was established for the western part of Heart Morass. The W.E.T (Wetland Environmental Taskforce) Trust and the Heart Morass Committee of Management was set up. Information gathering, vegetation mapping and baseline transect surveys were conducted.

Funding was obtained from Field and Game Australia (comments later) and Hugh Williamson Foundation for the purchase of over 1000 Hectares of the wetland area and it has become one of the largest wetland restoration projects in Australia on private land. One important and fundamental aspect for the success of this project was the active engagement of the local community.

The restoration plan was greatly assisted by two major flood events that occurred in 2007 which proved very timely for the health of the Morass. The first of these floods in June 2007 was the larger of the two and inundated the Morass and resulted in flushing out much of the salt that had accumulated during the drought. The second smaller flood resulted in even fresher conditions. Much of the surviving aquatic and terrestrial vegetation responded quickly with signs of new growth.

Matt Bowler from the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority has managed the project over the past six years. We are very fortunate to have Matt who is passionate about the restoration of what appeared to be an ecological wasteland. Matt showed a number of before and after photographs and the recovery of the plant species has been quite remarkable in a relatively short period. The restoration project began in 2006/07 when the 'before' photographs were taken. Victoria was experiencing severe drought conditions and the State Government were considering several options including the initiation of the construction of the Wonthaggi Desalination Plant. It was a time that community concern began to focus on water conservation. The 'after' photo shots were taken in 2010/11 showing the recovery of much of the original vegetation.

These higher water levels were maintained by the management of drop board structures on the existing large drains within the wetland. The suspension of cattle grazing

was a significant step in the restoration process. There was the first significant recruitment event of the River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) in over a century. There are now extensive areas of recovering reed beds across the Morass of *Phragmites australis* and *Juncus ingens* as well as other smaller herb, sedge and rush species.

The recovery of the fauna species was signified by a nesting pair of sea eagles and the re-emergence of the growling grass frog (*Litoria raniformis*) and the green and golden bell frog (*Litoria aurea*) and the re-establishment of breeding rookeries of Sacred and Straw-necked Ibis. Bird surveys conducted after the floods showed tens of thousands of ducks with all local species represented including the rare Freckled Duck.

This is an outstanding example of what can be achieved with a degraded site with the right commitment from individuals and small groups. Some members may see a conflict with the involvement of Field and Game Australia in the restoration of this Morass. They may argue that they participated in this project for all the wrong reasons but would the project ever have succeeded without their financial and time commitment. It is an example of a restoration project that brought together this unlikely partnership of hunters, conservationists and natural resource management bodies.

David Stickney

SEANA SPRING 2013 CAMP AT NUMURKAH

The SEANA Spring 2013 Camp was hosted in fine style by the Broken Creek FNC over the extended weekend of 11-14 October. The base was the spacious Numurkah Town Hall – used for evening talks, meetings, dinners, breakfasts and lunch-making. Participants arranged their own accommodation in the district.

It was good to learn something of the wide-ranging involvement of BCFNC members in local conservation projects, and also to note the strong support of the Moira Shire Council and community for this SEANA event (and conservation generally).

As recently as February/March 2012, Numurkah and much of the surrounding area along the Broken Creek were ravaged by severe floods. These devastated many homes, hundreds of km. of roads and wrecked facilities such as the local hospital. On the positive side, the floodwaters have regenerated the grasslands, woodlands and River Red Gum forests following years of drought.

A good range of excursions in the region roughly bounded by Numurkah, Nathalia and the section of the Murray River to their north provided over 100 participants an opportunity to appreciate the geology and vegetation systems of our riverine plains. A network of National and State Parks including the new Barmah NP partially addresses the need to protect remnant vegetation, particularly the much diminished grassy woodland.

In a brief outline of some of the activities, I'll cover the evening presentations first.

Friday evening: Indigenous Turtles

Former Senior Biodiversity Officer Rolf Weber and Graham Stockfeld of the Australian Freshwater Turtle Conservation and Research Association spoke about Victoria's endangered indigenous turtles. The three Victorian species are:

(i) Broad-shelled Turtle, *Macrochelodina expansa*

This secretive species is the largest long necked turtle in Australia: their shells grow to 48 cm in length, with necks measuring approx. 70% of their shell length.

(ii) Murray River Turtle, *Emydura macquarii ssp. macquarii*

These short-necked omnivorous turtles grow up to 34 cm in shell length and are more common in their range throughout the Murray-Darling Basin.

(iii) Eastern Snake-necked Turtle, *Chelodina longicollis*

This species, also known as the Common Long-necked Turtle, grows to around 26 cm and has powerful webbed feet for swimming, digging and tearing apart prey.

The speakers noted the major threat to all turtles of egg predation by feral pests such as foxes and pigs.

Saturday evening: Natural Regeneration in Central Victoria

Professor Ian Lunt, Institute for Land, Water and Society, Charles Sturt University, outlined work on mapping vegetation regrowth on the basis of aerial photographs, the project area extending from the Strathbogie Ranges to St Arnaud. Across the period since the 1970s, de-stocking of sheep and changes in land use have assisted natural regeneration of plants such as Grey Box and Cassinia and Acacia species which are prominent in the study region. Ian explained that dominance changes across time between grasses, shrubs and trees have been found to be more complex than previously thought. Earlier thinking was that, over time, there was a succession in dominance from grasses through shrubs to trees. His study has found that, often, there is something more like an equilibrium reached across those three vegetation types.

Sunday evening: The 2012 Floods

A video presentation prepared by Moira Shire revealed the vast impact of the recent floods of early 2012.

I'll now turn to a summary of some of the excursions.

Cadell Fault geology trip (All day, Saturday)

Noted geomorphologist and BCFNC member Roger Wrigley led a fascinating bus-based excursion focussed on what is now understood as a spectacular example of seismic activity altering the course of a river, in this case the Murray. Recent research suggests that, in the order of 45,000 years ago, several large earthquakes pushed up the large block of land between where Echuca and Deniliquin (NSW) now stand. (The Cadell Fault runs roughly from Deniliquin, through Mathoura and Barmah and south-west to Echuca.) This upthrust held back both the Murray and the Goulburn Rivers, initially flooding a huge area. Eventually the Murray turned north from what is now Mathoura, whereas it previously flowed westward through that area. Thus the regional landscape was quite

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different from what we see today; for example, there were no River Red Gums – this species invaded the area only about 6,000-8,000 years ago.

Climate change processes around 25,000 years ago (the last ice age) also brought about change. Deposited sands, silts and clays created the conditions for the Barmah Forest, supplanting open woodland and grassy plains along the river banks.

Goose Swamp (Sunday morning)

BCFNC member Anne Timm led a plants and birds ramble at Goose Swamp, westwards from Numurkah. The Red Gum predominated here. We found extensive patches of Grey Sunray, *Rhodanthe corymbiflora*, in flower. Other plants included Ruby Saltbush, New Holland Daisy, Wood-sorrel, Pink Bindweed, Nardoo (the small bulbs of which were used by aborigines to make bread) and Wallaby Grass. Birds sighted included Striated Pardalotes and Noisy Friarbirds. This is Superb Parrot country, and locals are planting such species as *Acacia pycnantha* to encourage them. We later watched these parrots flying overhead at our pleasant lunch spot in Anne and Denis Timm's delightful permaculture garden.



Patch of Grey Sunray, Goose Swamp

Murray River cruise (Sunday afternoon)

At the point where the Broken Creek meets the Murray River at the edge of the Barmah Forest, we boarded the 'Kingfisher' for a pleasant cruise along the narrowest section of the Murray below Albury. This section is known as the 'Barmah Choke', where the river flows at almost twice normal speed. This is a wildlife haven with 236 recorded bird species: we enjoyed seeing an Azure

Kingfisher, Sacred Ibis, Great Egret, Whistling Kite and Pelican in less than ideal conditions.

Wunghnu Common (Monday morning)

On our way south to Wunghnu Common for the final excursion, we stopped beside Broken Creek to view Numurkah's resident bat colony, estimated to then include around 900 Grey-headed Flying Foxes, although sometimes Little Red Flying Foxes are present. It appears that the bats breed elsewhere.

The Wunghnu Common is a small remnant area of Grey Box Grassy Woodland, regenerating following the 2012 floods. It is part of the Broken-Boosey State Park, and preserves plants of the area pre European settlement. Just a few of the plants of interest seen included Leafy Templetonia, *T. stenophylla*, Desert Cassia, *Senna artemesoides*, with clear yellow flowers with petals curving inwards, and Mallee Bush-pea, a *Eutaxia* species.



Chocolate Lily found in great profusion in Wunghnu Common

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Congratulations to the hard-working team of BCFNC members led by President Paul Hockett and Secretary Catherine Rourke on putting together a great camp.

Philip Rayment



Pendulous mistletoe on River Red Gum near Numurkah

REPORT ON BUSINESS MEETING HELD 18.11.2013

General Meetings & Excursions

Friday 28 February: Plastic Pollution & Australian Seabirds – Jennifer Lavers

Saturday 1 March: Phillip Island Excursion. Meet 10am at Information Centre on Phillip Island

Friday 28 March: AGM. Wildlife Health Surveillance – Pam Whiteley

Saturday 29 March: Aberfeldy area after the fires – Geoff Pike. Details at GM.

Botany Group: Saturday 8 February: 10am at 52 Earls Rd, Yarragon Sth – looking at plants from Dargo summer camp.

Botany Group: Saturday 8 March: Beach, bush and estuarine plants from mouth of the Powlett River, Kilcunda with Terri and Jenny. Contact: Wendy ☎ 5634 2246.

Bird Group: Tuesday 4 Feb: Wirilda/Tyers. Meet by 8.30am at Wirilda carpark.

Bird Group: Thursday 13 February: Survey at EA Wetlands. Meet 8.30am at Morwell River Bridge gate. Please contact Alix beforehand if intending to go. Contact Alix Williams ☎ 5127 3393, alixw@spin.net.au.

Finance – Cash Mgt Trading A/c \$2900.04. Term Deposit \$13,909.18

Business Pending

Botany microscope – discussion deferred.

Bird identification guide for Latrobe Valley – Kevin Roberts is not available to assist until January.

SEANA camp with Sale FNC for Spring 2016 – Phil said he will try again as John Steele has not contacted him as promised.

Business Arising, Correspondence & General Business

Dargo Summer Camp – all organized. Last year's planned excursions will stay the same.

Latrobe Valley Design & Sustainability Festival 22 November – unable to attend due to LVFNC GM clash.

Springsure Hill Landcare Group Wildflower Walk on Sweetwater Creek Track, Shady Creek November 23 – flyer noted.

Naturalist delay – due to computer problems, Naturalist for October was combined with November/December.

January BM – meeting cancelled. Any item needing attention will be dealt with via email. A special meeting to be held later in January.

Botany program 2014 has been prepared and sent to botany group.

2014 Program – the Portland SEANA camp date has been changed to 26-29 September. This clashes with our September meeting and excursion so will change to the week prior, 19 & 20 September.

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Jennifer Lavers (Feb speaker) request for save our seabirds fundraiser, related to her topic. Will email to members.

LVFNC website – free host service with State Library is to be discontinued so need to find new one. John Sunderland is investigating.

Naturalist production – discuss issues in January re bimonthly production, colour printing and emailing to some members.

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